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'Finding the Truth' About Government Censorship Not Easy, Journalists Tell Congress

During last week's hearing of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, investigative journalists Michael Shellenberger and Matt Taibbi said they were "obstructed at every turn" in their efforts to uncover the scope of the government's censorship of narratives it wanted to suppress.

By Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D.

MR. TAIBBI
MR. SHELLENBERGER

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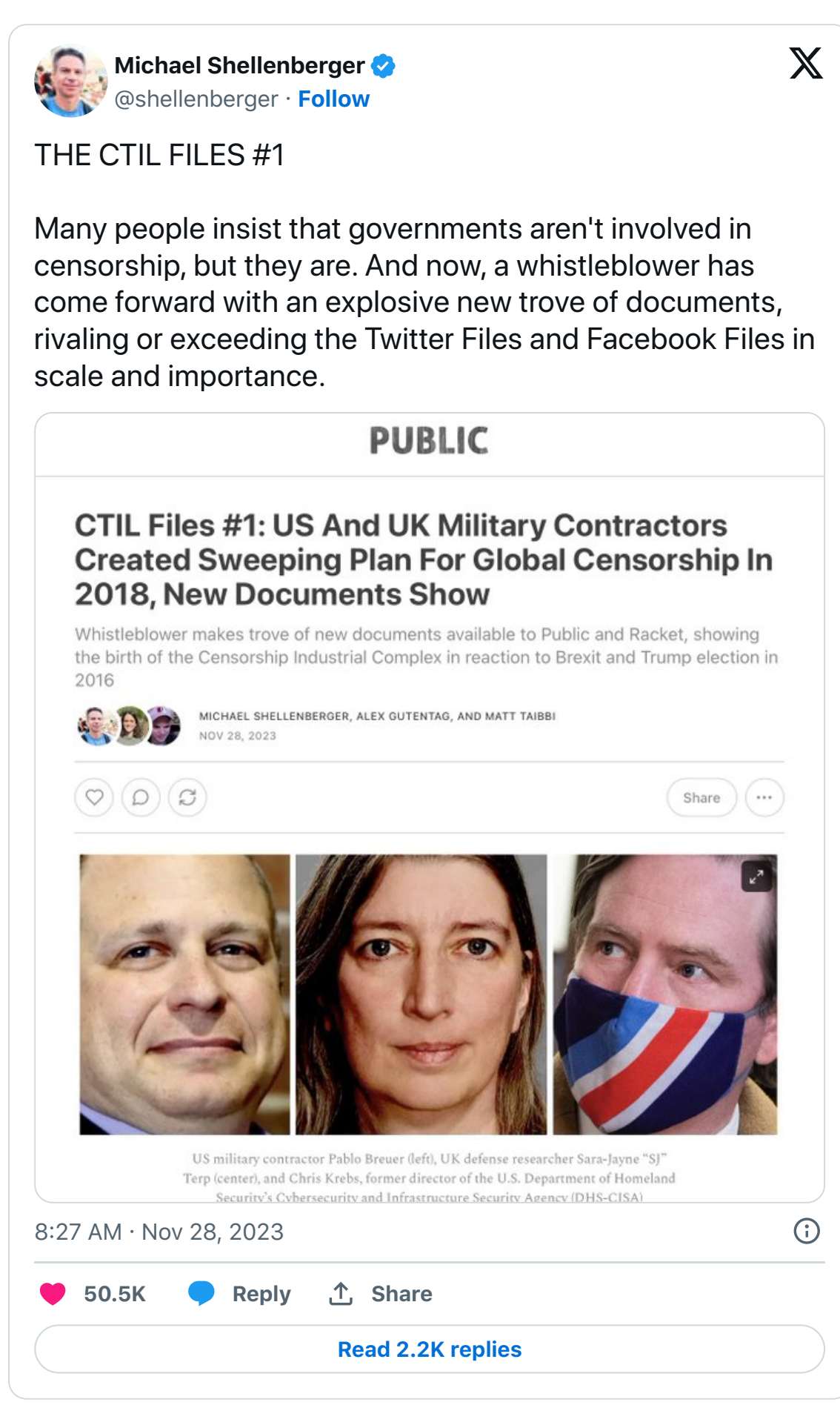
Last week's hearing of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government featured testimony from two investigative journalists about newly released documents.

Journalists Michael Shellenberger and Matt Taibbi discussed the "CTIL Files" — which refer to the Cyber Threat Intelligence League, or CTI League, a key player in the "Censorship-Industrial Complex."

The files are based on documents received from an unnamed but "highly credible" whistleblower, according to the journalists, and reveal more details about what they first referred to in March, during previous testimony before the committee, as the "Censorship-Industrial Complex."



Michael Shellenberger @shellenberger · Follow

THE CTIL FILES #1

Many people insist that governments aren't involved in censorship, but they are. And now, a whistleblower has come forward with an explosive new trove of documents, rivaling or exceeding the Twitter Files and Facebook Files in scale and importance.

PUBLIC

CTIL Files #1: US And UK Military Contractors Created Sweeping Plan For Global Censorship In 2018, New Documents Show

Whistleblower makes trove of new documents available to Public and Racket, showing the birth of the Censorship Industrial Complex in reaction to Brexit and Trump election in 2016

MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER, ALEX GUTENTAG, AND MATT TAIBBI
NOV 28, 2023

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US military contractor Pablo Breuer (left), UK defense researcher Sara-Jayne "SJ" Terp (center), and Chris Krebs, former director of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (DHS-CISA)

8:27 AM · Nov 28, 2023

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Two additional witnesses testified last week: Rupa Subramanya, a Canadian journalist who writes for The Free Press, and Olivia Troye, a former Homeland Security and Counterterrorism adviser who worked for the Office of Vice President Mike Pence.

The findings contained within the first release of the "CTIL Files" were a focus of the hearings, including allegations that the federal government engaged in "public-private partnerships" that outsourced censorship to private entities to circumvent First Amendment free speech protections.

Subramanya warned that encroaching censorship in the U.S. may lead to a situation similar to that of Canada, where many categories of speech are restricted.

Subcommittee to subpoena Biden administration officials

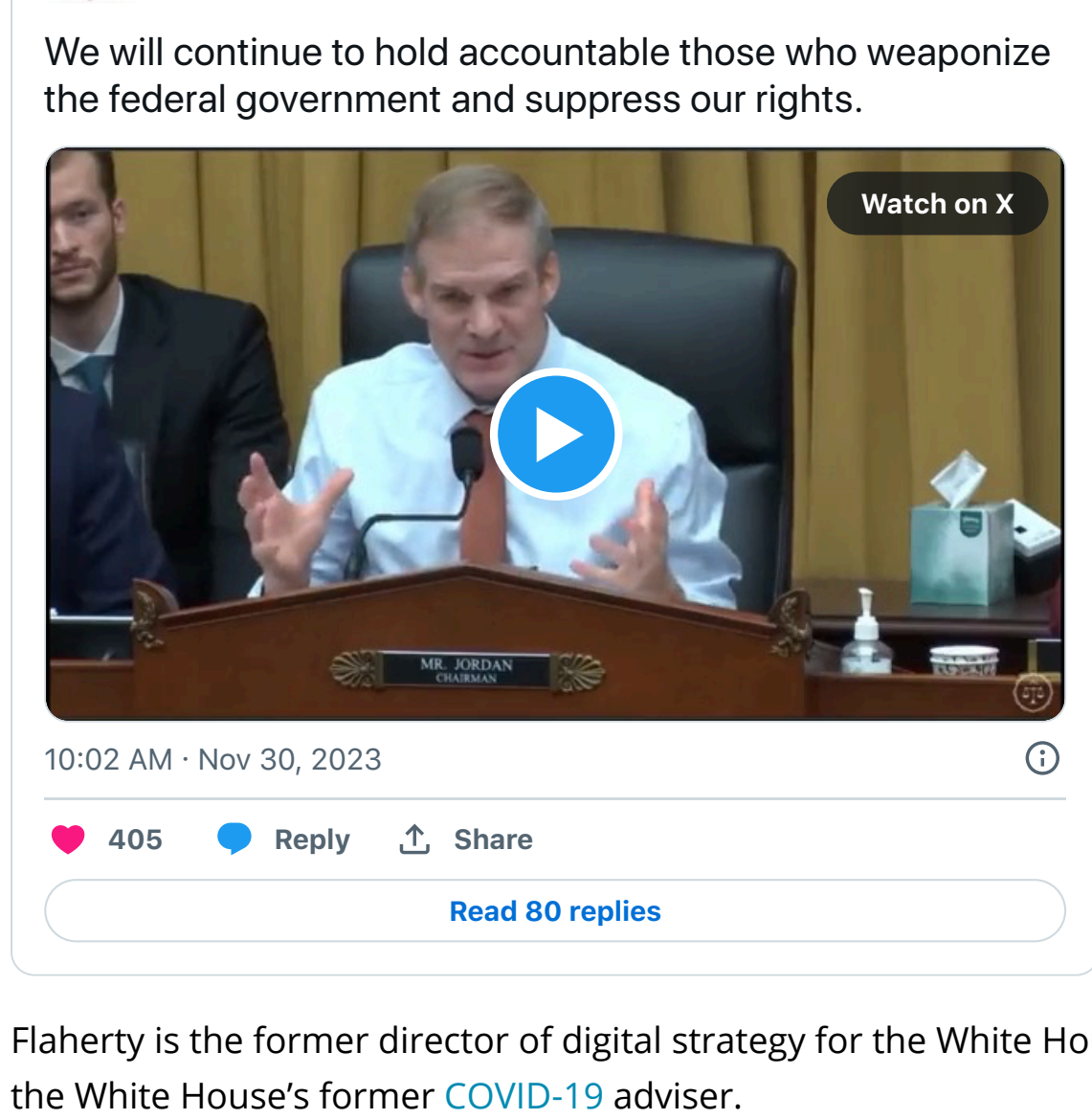
Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), chair of the subcommittee, said during his opening remarks, "One of the most egregious forms of the weaponization that this subcommittee has worked to expose is the coercion of social media companies by the federal government," crediting the "Twitter Files" with casting light on such examples.

"We wouldn't know anything that we know today, we wouldn't have learned and had the reports we've had, without the work of Matt Taibbi, Michael Shellenberger [and] other journalists who wrote the Twitter Files and … exposed these efforts," Jordan said.

"The path for getting this information out has not been easy. Finding the truth never is. Instead, we were obstructed at almost every turn."

Jordan said that while the subcommittee has previously shed light on multiple instances of federal government censorship of speech, and has "more information forthcoming," it is nevertheless "impossible to get a full accounting of the government's censorship efforts" without the cooperation of the "government actors involved."

He said the subcommittee subpoenaed former White House officials Robert Flaherty and Andrew Slavitt, noting they "have so far refused to sit for interviews despite being directly implicated in emails between the White House and tech companies."



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We will continue to hold accountable those who weaponize the federal government and suppress our rights.

10:02 AM · Nov 30, 2023

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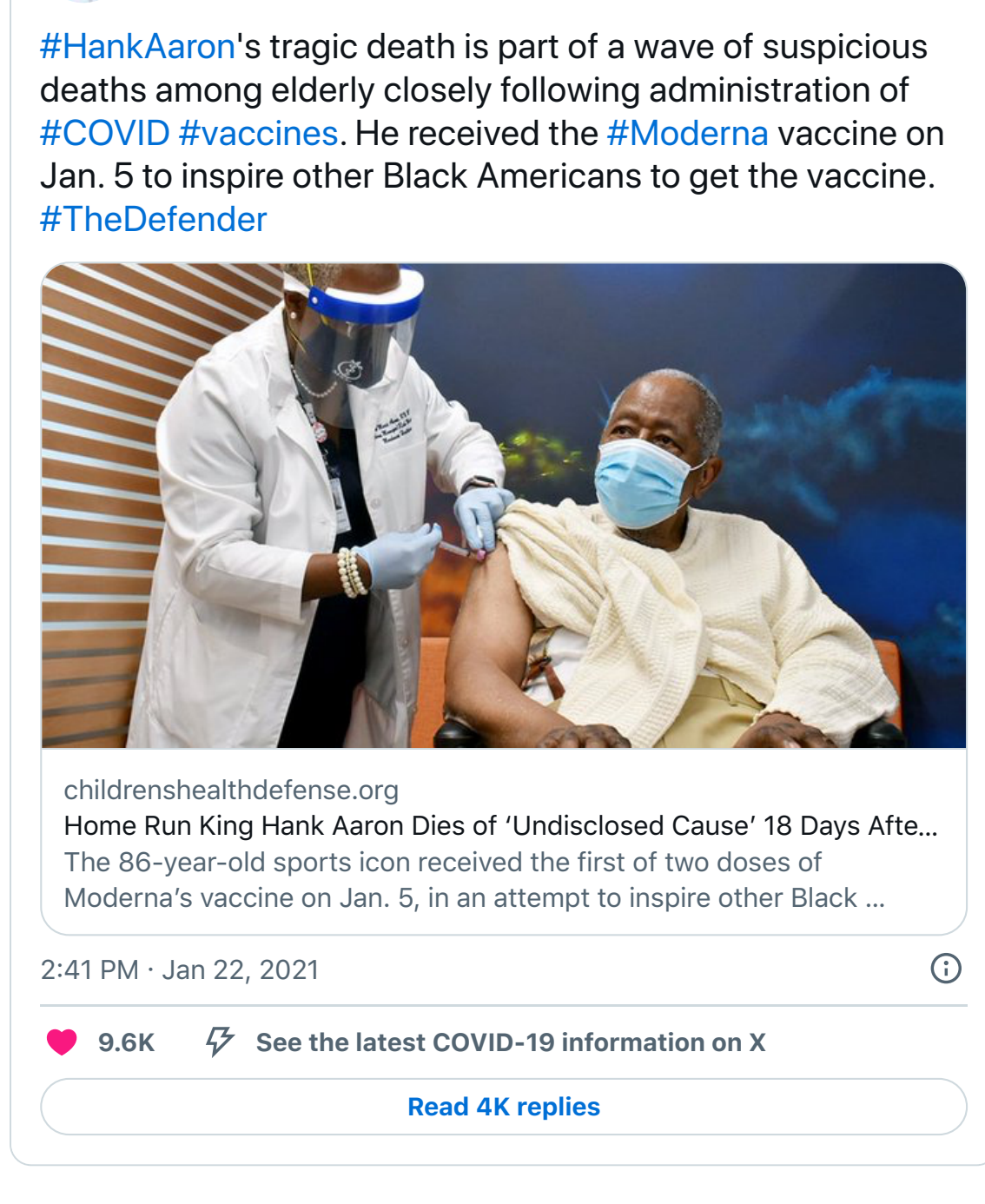
Flaherty is the former director of digital strategy for the White House. Slavitt is the White House's former COVID-19 adviser.

Jordan cited a previous release of the "Twitter Files" as an example of the censorship Flaherty and Slavitt engaged in, which targeted Children Health Defense's chairman on leave, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

"[On] the third day of the Biden administration … Slavitt sent an email from the White House to Twitter saying 'take down this tweet ASAP,' and of course the irony was, the tweet was from this administration's Democrat primary opponent, Robert F. Jennedy Jr."

"There was nothing in the tweet that was false," Jordan said, referring to a January 2021 tweet by Kennedy calling the death of baseball legend Hank Aaron 18 days after he received the COVID-19 vaccine "suspicious."



Robert F. Kennedy Jr @RobertKennedyJr · Follow

#HankAaron's tragic death is part of a wave of suspicious deaths among elderly closely following administration of #COVID #vaccines. He received the #Moderna vaccine on Jan. 5 to inspire other Black Americans to get the vaccine. #TheDefender

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Home Run King Hank Aaron Dies of 'Undisclosed Cause' 18 Days Afte…
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2:41 PM · Jan 22, 2021

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Government censorship 'worse than we realized'

Shellenberger and Taibbi told the committee that in the months since their previous testimony, many new revelations have come to light regarding the federal government's censorship efforts.

"The scope, power and law-breaking of the censorship-industrial complex are even worse than we realized," Shellenberger said.

Despite accusations from several members of the subcommittee that the censorship was partisan in nature, Taibbi said that those who were targeted were not exclusively Republicans or from the political right.

"We found evidence of suppression of movements on both sides," Taibbi said, citing the "CTIL Files'" inclusion of "evidence of monitoring groups like the Democratic Socialists of America" and hashtags like "healthcare for all."

"The nature of censorship programs is that they tend to expand in all directions," Taibbi said. Still, he noted that CTI League members were fixated on certain figures and narratives.

In the case of the CTI League, Shellenberger said U.S. and U.K. military contractors worked with social media platforms, nonprofit organizations, academic institutions and federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Cybersecurity and Information Security Agency [CISA] "to create a counter-disinformation project."

These efforts were bolstered by the National Science Foundation, which financed the development of censorship and disinformation tools, he added.

"This was one of the most sophisticated disinformation operations I've ever seen," Shellenberger said. "I've been involved in progressive causes for over 30 years. I've never seen anything so organized, anything that was so focused on a particular goal, and it had so many people that came from military intelligence operations."

"FBI agents were directly flagging content to Twitter saying, 'this appears to violate your terms of service' … Same thing with DHS staff. And then, of course, DHS created the Election Integrity Partnership [EIP], which then became the Virality Project, which was in the process of demanding mass censorship of Americans," Shellenberger added.

"The Virality Project urged Twitter, Facebook and other platforms to censor social media posts by ordinary citizens and elected officials alike," Shellenberger said. "EIP reported that they had a 75% response rate from the platforms and that 35% of the URLs that they reported were either removed, labeled, or throttled or soft-blocked."

Taibbi said that these examples point to a disturbing broader trend in American society.

"There's been a dramatic shift in attitudes about speech in this country, and many politicians now clearly believe the bulk of Americans can't be trusted to digest information on their own," he said.

"Having come to this conclusion, government agencies like DHS and the FBI, and the quasi-private agencies who do anti-disinformation work, have taken upon themselves the paternalistic responsibility to sort out for us what is and is not safe," he added.

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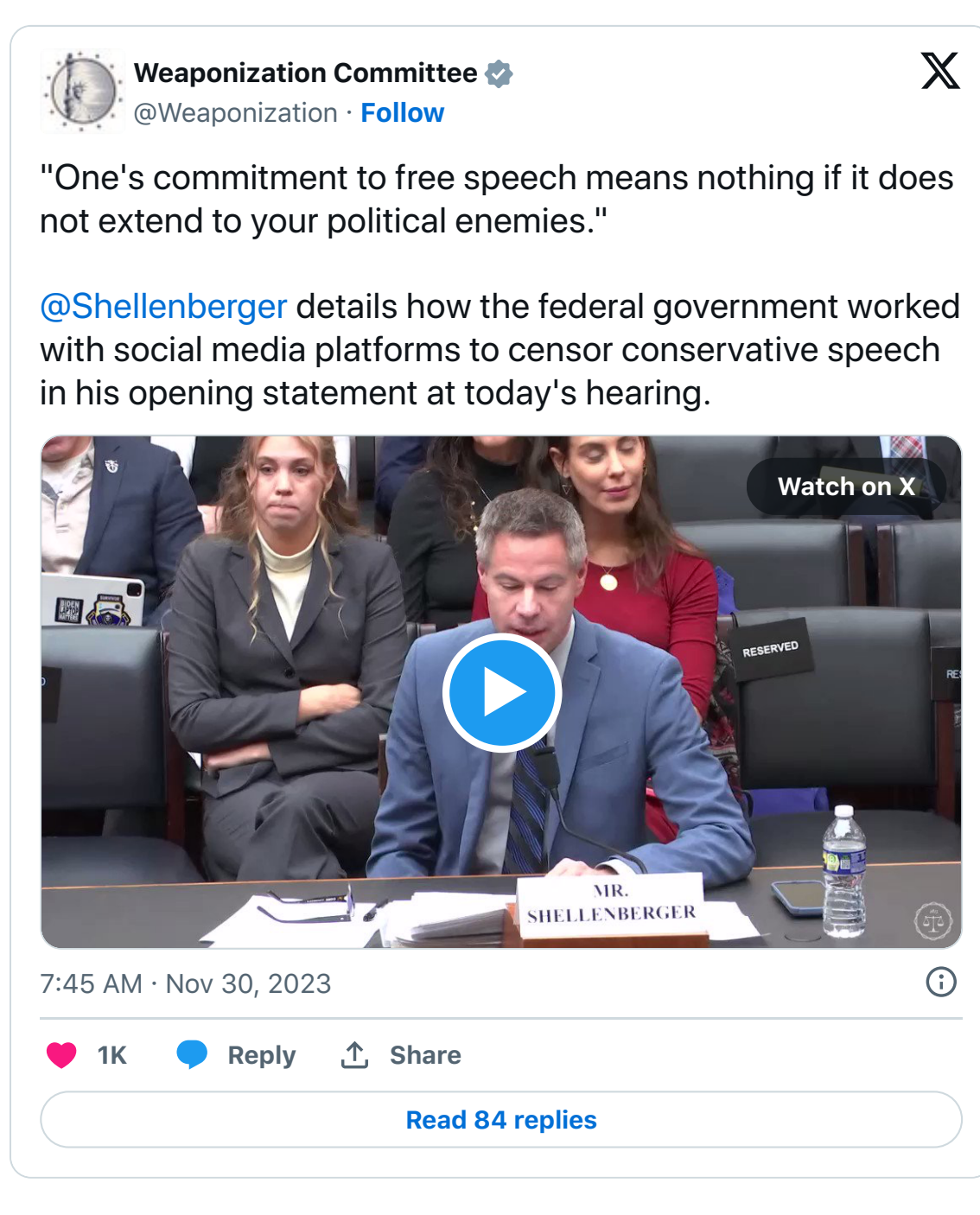
Censorship of true information to ensure 'people took the vaccines'

The government's censorship efforts extended to truthful content posted on social media platforms related to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines.

"In 2021, CISA and the White House violated the First Amendment and undermined America's response to the COVID pandemic by demanding that Facebook and Twitter censor content that Facebook itself said was often true, including about vaccine side effects," Shellenberger said, for fear the content would lead to vaccine hesitancy.

"All of this is profoundly un-American," Shellenberger said. "One's commitment to free speech means nothing if it does not extend to your political enemies."



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"One's commitment to free speech means nothing if it does not extend to your political enemies."

@Shellenberger details how the federal government worked with social media platforms to censor conservative speech in his opening statement at today's hearing.

7:45 AM · Nov 30, 2023

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According to Shellenberger, the recently released CTIL Files showed that "both CTIL and the leaders of the Stanford Internet Observatory [who operated the EIP and Virality Project] emphasized that 'malinformation' was the main event. Stopping narratives was the main event. It was their main focus."

"The smaller stuff, the inaccurate tweets, that was less of a concern. They were really focused on the big objectives … making sure people took the vaccines," he said.

Taibbi referred to Twitter censoring the posts of Stanford University School of Medicine professor Dr. Jay Bhattacharya as such an example.

"That was one of the very first things that we found in the Twitter Files, and it was an early example of what we came to understand as malinformation," he said. "It's the idea of something that's not untrue or is true but is believed to produce an undesirable political result. This is extremely dangerous."

When asked by Rep. Elise M. Stefanik (R-N.Y.) what they felt was the most alarming finding from the CTIL Files and Twitter Files, Taibbi and Shellenberger referred to the collusion between government and intelligence agencies and social media companies.

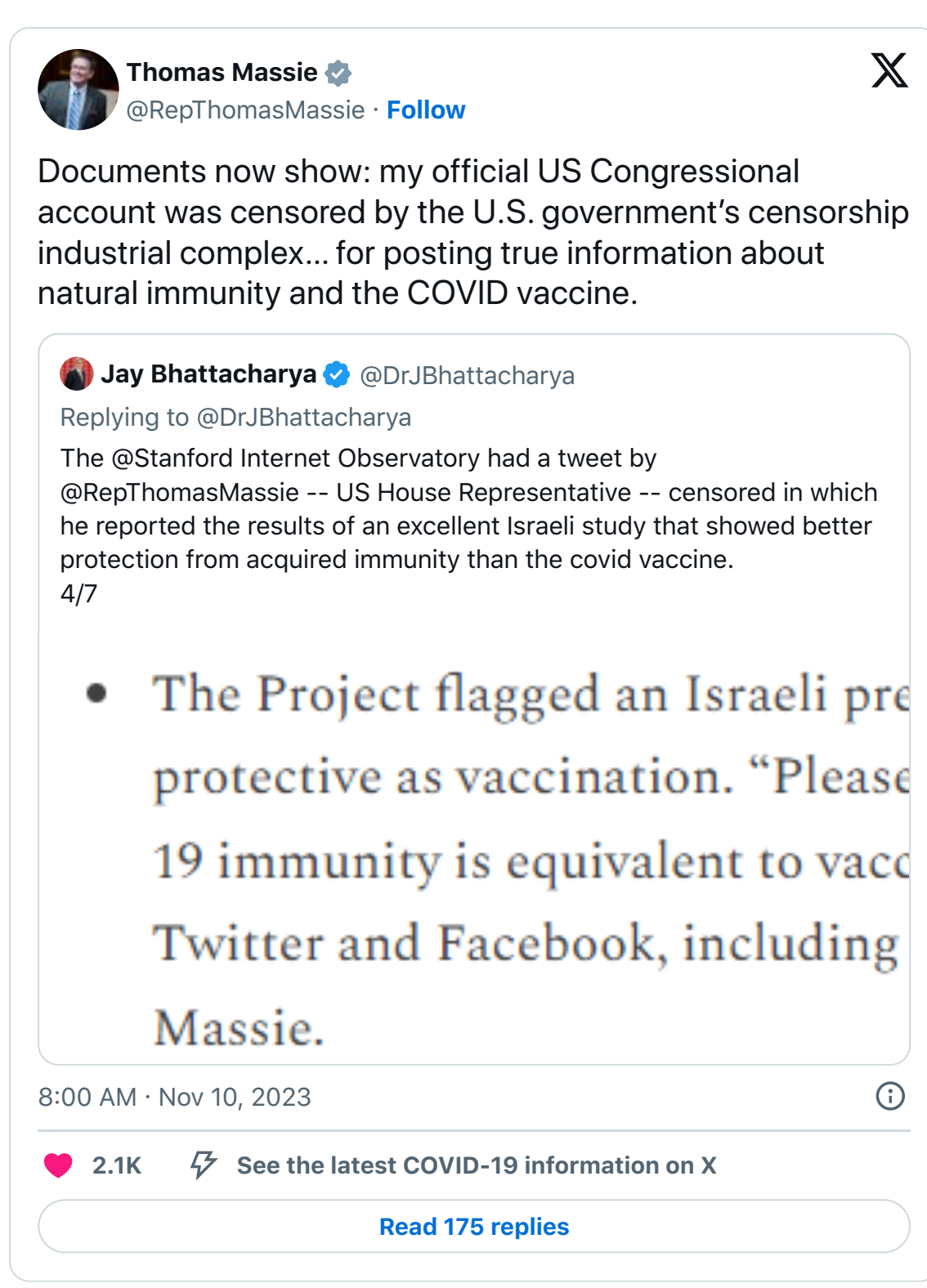
"I think the most alarming thing … was the regular [and] organized stream of communication between the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the largest tech companies in the country. They had an organized system for flagging content, not occasionally, but in enormous numbers, involving spreadsheets of accounts that ran to the hundreds and thousands," Taibbi said.

"For me, it was seeing the so-called 'former' FBI officials within Twitter and working with other groups, including the Aspen Institute, participating in an effort to … 'pre-bunk' the Hunter Biden laptop [story] before it was ever published [and] to get it censored by Twitter, in violation of Twitter's own terms of service," Shellenberger said.

Responding to the revelations, Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) said "It's just absolutely fascinating to me how folks on the left … are calling these things 'conspiracy theories.'"

Troye was one such individual referring to these so-called "conspiracy theories." During the hearing, she was questioned by Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.), who confronted her with a tweet of his that, according to the Twitter Files, had been flagged for censorship by the Virality Project — information which Shellenberger confirmed.

When Massie asked if she was "denying that had occurred," Troye said, "I would have no knowledge of that … I'm not aware of that happening." When Massie later asked if there was any reason why that tweet, which referenced an Israeli study, would be flagged, Troye said, "It was flagged for a reason."



Thomas Massie @RepThomasMassie · Follow

Documents now show: my official US Congressional account was censored by the U.S. government's censorship industrial complex… for posting true information about natural immunity and the COVID vaccine.

Jay Bhattacharya @DrJBhattacharya
Replying to @DrJBhattacharya
The @Stanford Internet Observatory had a tweet by @RepThomasMassie -- US House Representative -- censored in which he reported the results of an excellent Israeli study that showed better protection from acquired immunity than the covid vaccine.
4/7

- The Project flagged an Israeli pre
protective as vaccination. "Please
19 immunity is equivalent to vacc
Twitter and Facebook, including
Massie.

8:00 AM · Nov 10, 2023

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"What's the reason? Is there ever a good reason to censor a member of Congress?" Massie asked. "I bring this up not to claim that members of Congress have more right to free speech than the general public [but] to show … your testimony is false [and] if they can do this to a member of Congress' official account, they can do it to anybody."

In another instance, Rep. Dan Goldman (D-N.Y.) claimed that "in 87% of those flags, they [the social media posts in question] were not removed."

"Is 13% censorship still censorship? Absolutely," Jordan responded. "Just through the Missouri v. Biden case, there is a treasure trove of actual evidence … that shows that all of this has been happening under the Biden administration and that there is true censorship from this White House into the American people," he said.

"I think it's important to remember that the First Amendment not only guarantees people the right to speak and voice their opinions, but it also guarantees the right of all of us to hear those opinions. That's a crucial element of the promise," Taibbi said.

"The Wuhan Cover-Up"
by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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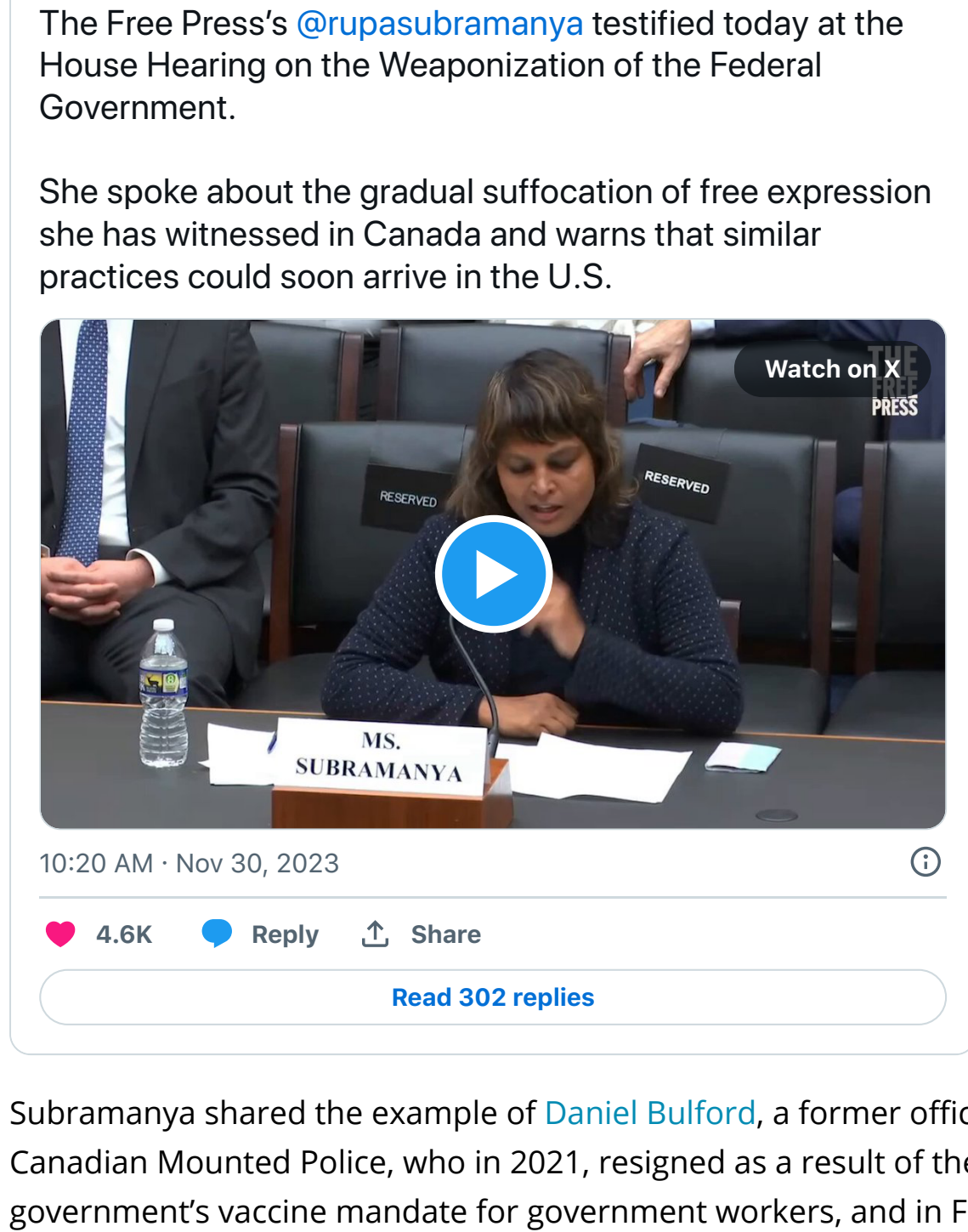
De-banking, more restrictions possible if censorship not stopped

In her testimony, Subramanya warned that Canada serves as a warning for what the U.S. may become if government censorship is permitted to continue.

"I'd like all of you to think of me as a time traveler from the not-too-distant future coming back … to offer you a glimpse of what could lie ahead for America," she said, adding:

> "I live in a time in which in the name of fairness, you can't share the stories you write for my news publication on social media. I live in a time in which in the name of the 'common good' you can be kicked out of your bank and online payment system simply for expressing the wrong political views … I live in a time in which in the name of 'safety' you can be arrested for exercising your right to peaceful protest if you happen to be protesting the wrong thing."



The Free Press @TheFP · Follow

The Free Press's @rupasubramanya testified today at the House Hearing on the Weaponization of the Federal Government.

She spoke about the gradual suffocation of free expression she has witnessed in Canada and warns that similar practices could soon arrive in the U.S.

10:20 AM · Nov 30, 2023

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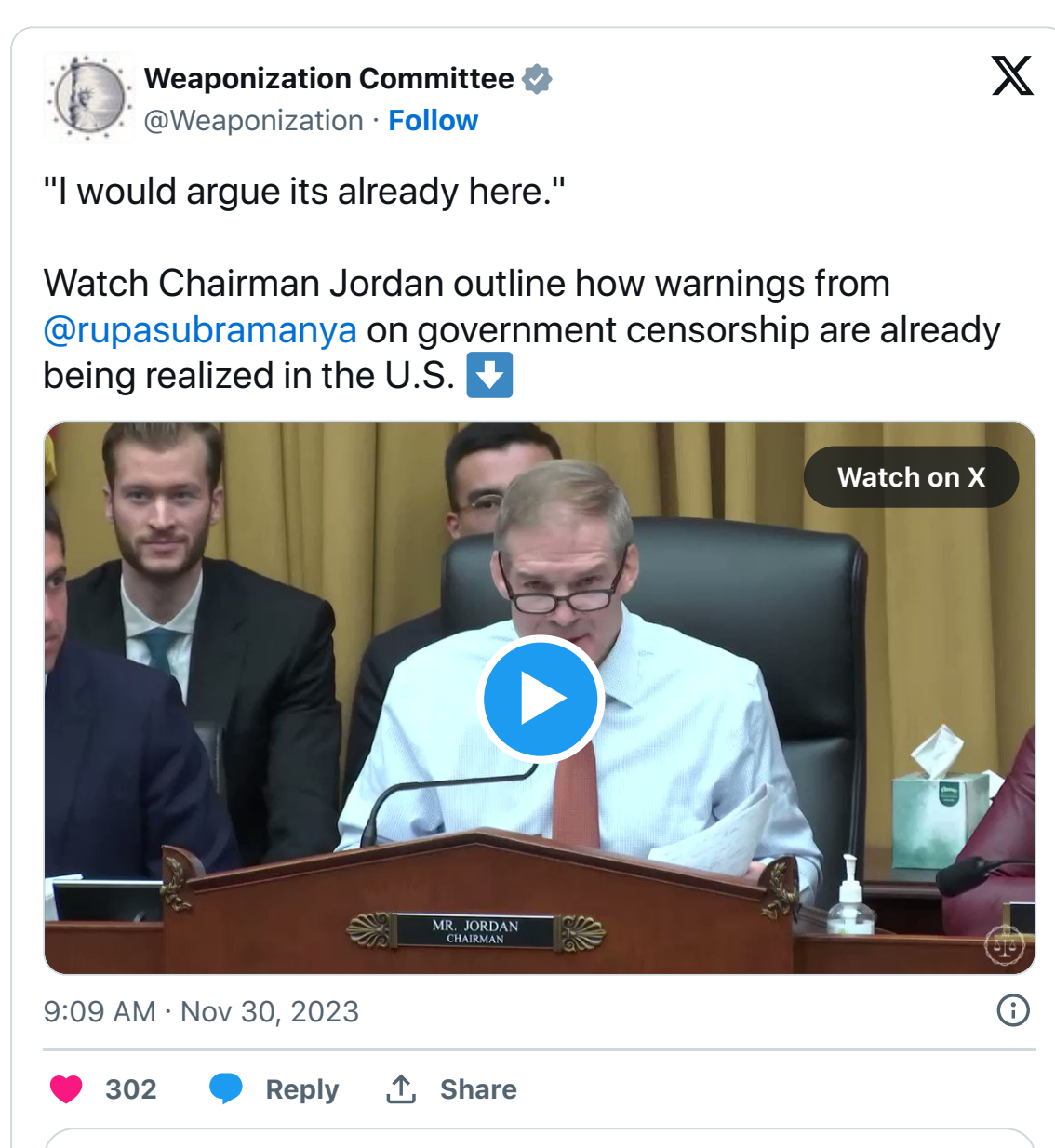
Subramanya shared the example of Daniel Bulford, a former officer in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who in 2021, resigned as a result of the Canadian government's vaccine mandate for government workers, and in February 2022 participated in the truckers' convoy.

According to Subramanya, "The government declared a state of emergency. Danny, like many demonstrators, was arrested and later released without charge." Yet, "something chilling happened," Subramanya said. Bulford soon found that he and his wife were unable to access their bank accounts and "had no access to any credit."

"This is what it means to be de-banked," she said, adding that this "has been one of the Trudeau government's weapons of choice since 2018," targeting "more than 800 Canadians who did things that the government didn't approve of."

"What is happening in Canada is a gradual suffocation of free expression … draped in a cloak of niceness, inclusivity and justice, but it is regressive, authoritarian and illiberal." She added that such tactics are already being implemented in the U.S.

"There are people who have been de-banked in America [and] they generally tend to be on the conservative side," she said. "I've interviewed pastors, missionaries who do good work overseas. They've been de-banked with no explanation. The reasons are very vague, that 'your risk profile doesn't match what we're comfortable with.'"



Weaponization Committee @Weaponization · Follow

"I would argue its already here."

Watch Chairman Jordan outline how warnings from @rupasubramanya on government censorship are already being realized in the U.S. ⬇️

9:09 AM · Nov 30, 2023

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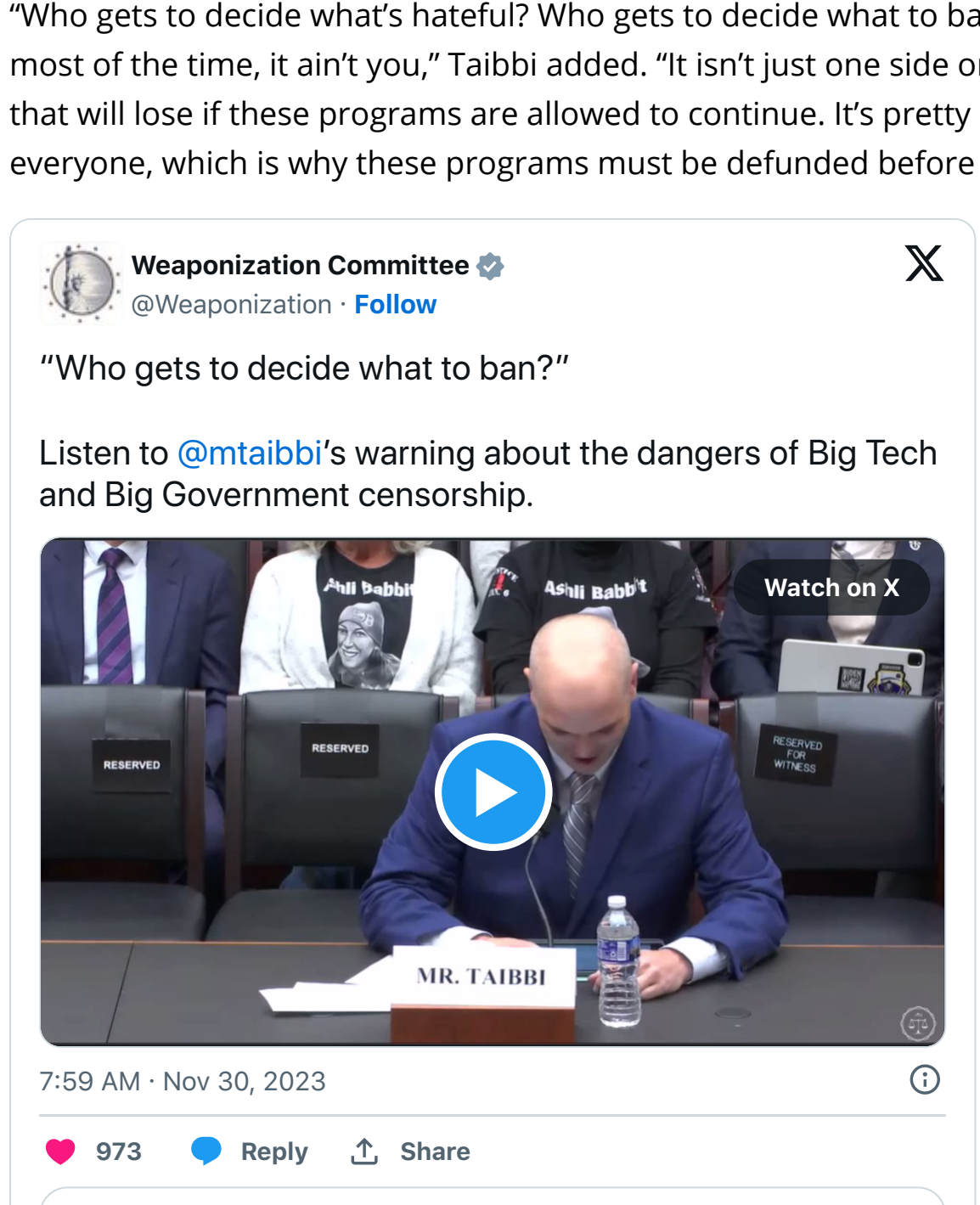
"I came here today not simply to warn you about what lies ahead, but to plead with you to do something about it. Now is not the time to be polite. Now is the time to defend loudly the liberties and rights that have given us the greatest freedoms in human history across the world," she said.

'Who gets to decide what to ban?'

Taibbi and Shellenberger called for multiple federal government agencies and programs implicated in censorship to be defunded or abolished.

"Who gets to decide what's hateful? Who gets to decide what to ban? Because most of the time, it ain't you," Taibbi added. "It isn't just one side or the other that will lose if these programs are allowed to continue. It's pretty much everyone, which is why these programs must be defunded before it's too late."



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"Who gets to decide what to ban?"

Listen to @mtaibbi's warning about the dangers of Big Tech and Big Government censorship.

7:59 AM · Nov 30, 2023

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"I encourage Congress to defund and dismantle the government organizations involved in censorship," Shellenberger proposed.

"I would encourage significant guardrails and oversight to prevent such censorship from happening again," he added. "I would encourage Congress to prohibit government officials from asking the platforms to remove content which the Supreme Court may or may not rule unconstitutional next year when it decides on the Missouri v. Biden case."

"Congress must act and hold these government officials accountable," Gaetz said, noting that he is co-sponsoring a bill introduced by Jordan and Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), the Free Speech Protection Act, which "is needed to ensure that government officials face significant consequences for engaging in the censorship and suppression of speech."

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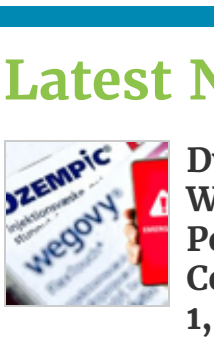
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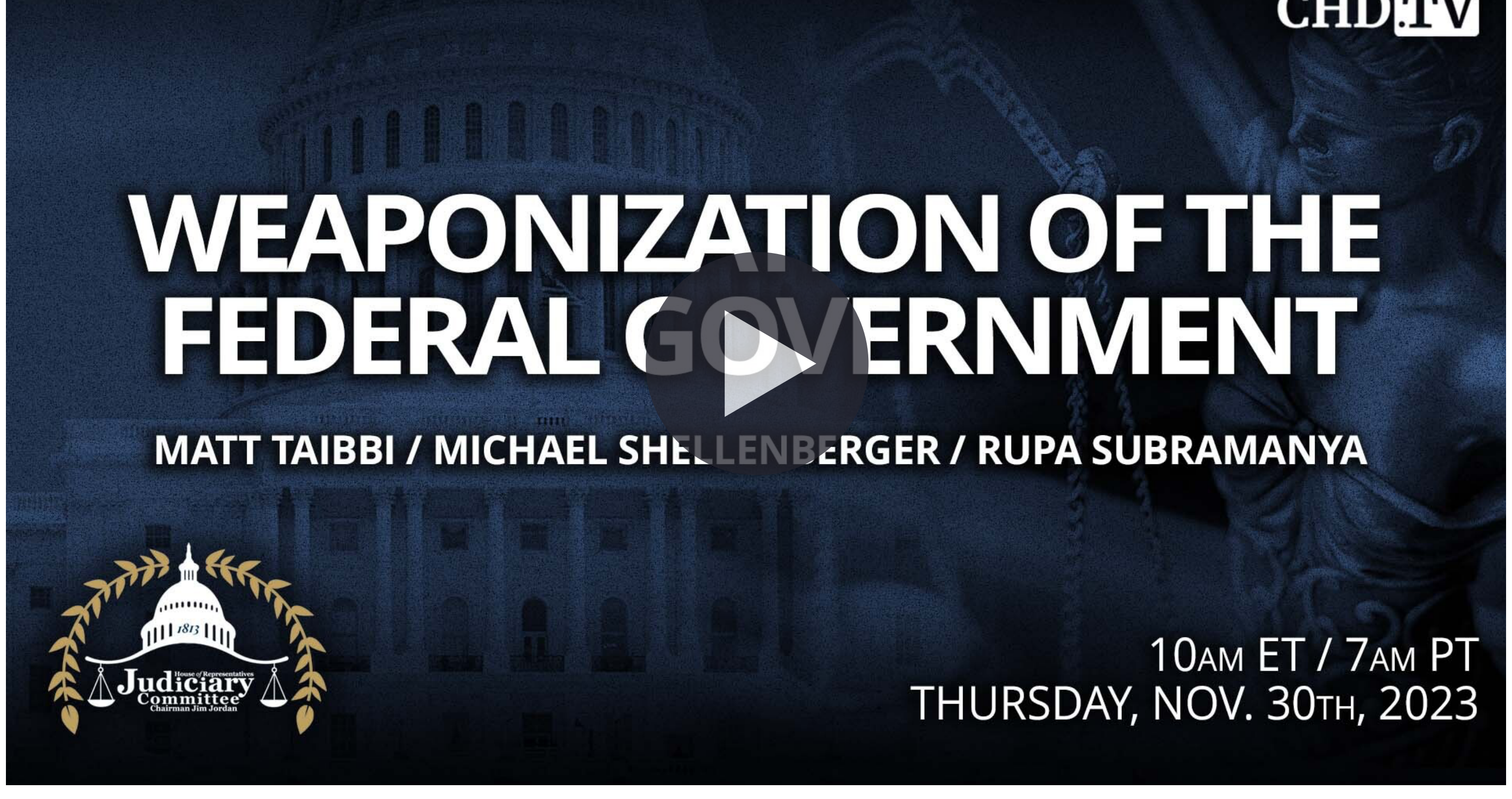
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House of Representatives Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan
10AM ET / 7AM PT
THURSDAY, NOV. 30TH, 2023

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Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D.

Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D., based in Athens, Greece, is a senior reporter for The Defender and part of the rotation of hosts for CHD.TV's "Good Morning CHD."

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